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Class Tourism and Photography

According to Susan Sontag, ‘Photography has always been fascinated by social heights and lower depths... From the beginning, professional photography typically meant the broader kind of class tourism, with most photographers combining surveys of social abjection with portraits of celebrities... Social misery has inspired the comfortably well-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them.’ Sontag also notes that photographers were often attracted to the exoticism of foreign cultures and to the domestic ‘other’ that the working classes came to represent, citing John Thomson and Adolphe Smith’s, *Street Life in London* (1877-8) as, ‘the earliest model of the sustained look downward’. With Sontag’s work in mind, my research critically examines the career of Emil Otto Hoppé, a high-society portrait photographer who also drew his subjects from the opposite end of the social scale, making photographs of London ‘characters’ and street types in the early twentieth century and Hoppé was clearly drawn to the alterities of race and class. In the light of Sontag’s observations, however, I argue that Hoppé’s photographs and Beresford’s

accompanying literary biographies are pervaded by a superficially benign, but paternalistic, class tourism. Whether photography is, indeed, the ‘gentlest of all predations’ is very much open to question, and such issues are not of merely historical interest. **(Illustrations: See examples from Martin Parr, People of Walmart, or chav female typology. Illus 2,3 4,)**

Taken from Life appeared in 1922, when both photographer and writer were at the peak of their careers. **(Illus 5 Hoppe and Beresford)** Featuring a series of short biographies, it examines the lives of seven characters drawn mostly from the metropolitan working class. As a direct social counterpoint to Hoppé’s high-society portraits for *The Tatler* magazine, through which a middle-class readership might obtain a look upward at their social ‘betters’, he permitted instead a look down to those social ‘inferiors’ of the metropolitan working class. To the celebrated qualities of beauty and wealth were now opposed the negatives of poverty or notoriety.

Beresford was an admirer of H.G Wells, and both authors were concerned with ideas of social decline and degeneration. *Taken from Life* attempts to explicate the workings of the inner mind of those least successful in London society and to account for their lack of social advancement by an investigation of their psychological make-up, going beyond a sociological analysis to explain how the lower orders might be psychologically and intellectually predisposed to fail. Beresford generally assumes the reality of metropolitan, working-class degeneration, but dwells heavily upon the inherited disposition of his subjects,

as well as their position within existing class relations. When understood within the context of Social Darwinism and Galtonian theories of social atrophy, however, the theme of degeneration running through *Taken from Life* is revealed as a well established and pervasive discourse: what Gareth Stedman Jones calls a ‘mental landscape within which the middle class could recognise and articulate their own anxieties about urban existence.’¹⁵

I only have time to mention the first example from *Taken from Life*, the tale of John Tritton who emerges as a character endlessly at odds with his wife who is discontent with their house in suburban Wood Green, and whom he eventually deserts. Beresford acts as moral arbiter, but the author’s emphasis falls ultimately upon Tritton’s inability to live up to either his wife’s (or Beresford’s) ideas of suburban respectability. In dwelling upon the notion of respectability, Beresford employs an essentially Victorian trope that continues to be fundamental to the representation of the working class. The respectable members of the lower classes are those who are in regular employment and deemed to work hard, practising thrift in their everyday affairs and self-restraint in their sexual and drinking habits. They conduct themselves well in public, and duly accept the law and their social position. The ‘residuum’ comprises those who do not work and who are, therefore, poor by choice; they are economically and sexually profligate, violent, filthy and diseased. They possess a propensity for criminal behaviour, and liable to protest at their condition individually or in serious numbers.

According to Beresford, Tritton's 'fall' is the result of both his reaction to his wife's enthusiasm for suburban respectability and his own hereditary propensity to degeneration. He makes frequent recourse to approximate renditions of Tritton's vernacular speech, to what Raymond Williams termed 'the orthography of the uneducated', and language emerges as an important register of social differentiation.¹ Tritton remarks, 'She didn't care so long as we could 'ave one o' the curates in to supper. And, o'course, I'd never 'ave dared tell her as we must bust sooner or later.' The emphasis upon vernacular speech bolsters the naturalism of Beresford's account but serves to reinforce class differentiation. Beresford's language asserts his position as a knowledgeable and neutral observer, so that this highly constructed and classed form of social observation appears a value-free assessment of observable fact.

Beresford's narratives are largely fictionalised accounts, but what of the authority of Hoppé's photographs? In comparison with the other images in *Taken from Life*, the photograph of John Tritton is the least descriptive, despite the frontality of its pose. In Hoppé's photograph, Tritton seems a murky figure who barely emerges from an equally undistinguished background. Indeed, one might consider this a verbal transliteration of his portrait; one that eerily equates with the précis of his life as related by Beresford himself. Tritton wears a dark jacket with a muffler, and his collar appears to be turned up, as if against the cold. His bowler hat, once a symbol of his respectable status in metropolitan life, looks scruffy and dented. A highlight that runs across his brow, above his

right eye, suggests that its brim is cracked, allowing the light through. Tritton's face is out of focus – remarkably so – and this qualified form of photographic indexicality is an inversion of Hoppé's normative portrait technique where critics had noted Hoppé's ability to suggest the physical presence of his subjects. In comparison with the other subjects of *Taken from Life*, Tritton seems a particularly indistinct individual. His lack of *photographic* definition, or distinction is, therefore, very much in accord with his lack of *social* distinction, as John Tritton descends to the depths of the *Lumpenproletariat*.

Elsewhere, in his autobiography, Hoppé appears to express a level of anthropological interest akin to Beresford's own, when he remarks:

I become interested in the psychology of the by-products and offshoots of the social order and spend much time searching for and photographing character types.

Sontag notes the classed nature of this kind of photography, suggesting that in gazing 'on other people's reality with curiosity, with detachment, the... photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal.'³⁸ At the heart of this class tourism there is an underlying voyeurism; a spectacle of difference that permits the bourgeois spectator to scrutinise his antithesis in the lower class 'other'. The social and cultural divide that separated the observers from the observed had already been noted by Charles Masterman in 1909. In his book, *The Condition of England*, Masterman remarked that, 'We are gradually learning that "the people of

England” are as different from, and as unknown to, the classes that investigate, observe and record, as the people of China and Peru’.





